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Prefiguration

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In 2011 and the ensuing years, the world witnessed a global wave of assembly movements such as *Occupy Wall Street*, the Spanish *Indignados*, the Turkish Gezi Park protests and *Nuit Debout* in France. What distinguished these various movements is that they often did not seek to acquire state power, and in many cases refused to even engage with the existing institutions and procedures of representative democracy (Mouffe 2013). Also, they did not often have a comprehensive programme. Instead, within the confined space of an occupied square, these movements created a miniature version of the kind of society that they sought to realise on a grander scale. They experimented with alternative forms of decision-making and new forms of movement organisation and mobilisation, and they established alternative networks of redistribution, education, and communication (Graeber 2013; Howard and Patt-Broyden 2011). This particular form of political activism, which prioritises the experimental realisation of a future ideal in the 'here and now', is often described as 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics' (Van de Sande 2013).

Where exactly does this concept of 'prefiguration' come from? Its introduction in the academic literature on radical politics is relatively recent. Stemming from the tradition of biblical exegesis (Auerbach 1984; Gordon 2017), it was first introduced in studies of anarchist and syndicalist workers' movements in the late 1970s (Boggs 1977). But, arguably, the term refers to a particular view of revolutionary change that has divided the international workers' movement since the 1860s (Graham 2015). In those days, the 'First International' was split between anarchist and Marxist factions, which had very different views on what revolutionary strategy their respective movements should pursue.

According to Marx and his followers, the acquisition of state power was an important step in the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Marx 2010a, 355). The state would gradually dissolve only *after* the proletariat's rise to power (Marx and Engels 2010, 86-7). Until then, it should function as a revolutionary instrument – an instrument that, it should be noted, would change significantly in the hands of the proletarian class. Marx' great opponent within the International, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), insisted instead that the social revolution must be established immediately, and thus cannot be preceded by a distinctive *political* revolution. The state had to be abolished "on the first day of the revolution" (Bakunin 1992, 130). This insistence was much to the annoyance of Marx, who objected that the revolutionary struggle must be directed against the structural basis of capitalism and private property – not its superficial workings and mechanisms, such as the state or hereditary capital (Marx 2010b).

It is clear who 'won' the debate eventually: in 1872 the anarchists were expelled from The International, and Bakunin – who in his own days was no less prominent than Marx – went down in the books as a marginal figure in the history of the international workers' movement. Nevertheless, I hold that some important lessons can be learned from Bakunin today.

First, Bakunin held as a principle that the means of revolutionary struggle must be consistent with its ends. He foresaw that the use of state power as a revolutionary instrument would only lead to a reproduction of its inherent injustices (1990, 178). One simply cannot expect to establish equality or freedom on the basis of inequality and oppression: liberty, Bakunin claimed, "can be created only by liberty" (idem, 179). Thus the workers' movement should already try to embody its ideal image of a future, decentralised and federated social order: "having for its objective not the

creation of new despotisms but the uprooting of all domination, [it should] take on an essentially different character from the organization of the State" (1973, 255). This insistence, that the means of radical change be consistent with its ends, has continued to inform the anarchist tradition ever since (Goldman 1924; Franks 2003), and can also be encountered in the practices of recent assembly movements, such as *Occupy Wall Street*.

Second, it follows that the struggle against the existing order, and the formation of a radical alternative to it, are complementary parts of the same revolutionary process. One does not follow upon the other, as Marx held, but they always presuppose each other (Van de Sande 2015). Anarchists have therefore always maintained that revolutionary movements should not only seek to topple the capitalist order, but should also gradually give rise to the political and organisational structures that could eventually *replace* it. Whereas Bakunin's contemporaries called this strategy 'embryonism' (Nettlau 277-8), later syndicalist movements would describe it as an attempt to 'build a new society in the shell of the old' (Schmidt and Van der Walt, 2009, 21). In today's activist jargon, finally, the term 'prefiguration' is used in reference to the same strategic rationale (Graeber 2013, 232-3). This indeed is precisely what recent assembly movements sought to establish in the long term. Ideally, the prefigurative miniature society that was erected in Zuccotti Park would eventually serve as "a stepping-stone toward the creation of a whole network of such assemblies" (idem, 43), which would make the current order redundant.

One may argue that this prefigurative approach is not necessarily incompatible with a Marxist analysis of capitalism or revolutionary politics – especially given that both the state and the structure of capital have changed significantly since the late 19th century. Autonomist Marxists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, tend to describe the *multitude's* resistance against capital precisely in terms of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' (Hardt and Negri 2009, 8; 301). John Holloway, in turn, has demonstrated why a militant strategy against everyday alienation in capitalist society entails the prefiguration of a radical alternative (2010, 153-4). Besides, there *are* places in his oeuvre where Marx seems to realise the relevance of a prefigurative approach – for example in his reflections on the Paris Commune of 1871, which "could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people" (2010b, 217). But he, and many followers in his wake, also hastened to add that durable and radical transformation of society would always require the seizure of state power (Lenin 1987) and a centralist party as the platform of organisation (Dean 2016). More generally, the question of how exactly a prefigurative politics must lead to successful political change in the long term, remains open for debate.

In any case, the prefigurative experiments of anarchist movements in the past, and of assembly movements such as *Occupy Wall Street* in the present, do pinpoint at least two blind spots in Marx' thought. First, they illustrate that the aim of revolutionary politics cannot be reduced to matters of social-economic equality or divisions of labour. Political equality, democratic participation, and freedom of association are equally important objectives that a radical politics worth its salt must address. Second, the emergence of prefigurative movements and strategies suggest that it is not sufficient to pursue a vague concept of revolutionary change in a distant future. We also want to acquire at least some idea of what it might mean to live in a radically different society *today*.

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